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## THE GUSLE SINGER AND HIS SONGS

By BEATRICE L. STEVENSON

THE occasion of the outbreak of European war serves to endow with importance and interest all matters connected with Servian customs and nationalism, and significant in the light of folklore psychology as well as in the realm of current events is the *gusle* (*gusla*) art of the South Slavic peoples. The *gusle javorove* is a little instrument of white-maple wood, with rounded back and parchment front, and a single string of horsehair—seemingly nothing more than a mere musician's trinket but found in many a Servian home, and vividly able to recall centuries of poetic outpouring of artistic impulses as well as many a living picture of the *guslar* singers themselves, those bards who sang and still do sing the songs of the people in Servia, Bosnia, Kroatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Montenegro, and all the provinces of the Adriatic. Hitherto but little noticed by dwellers in the outside world, these singers yet date their rise from before the era of the Troubadours in France, who, like the skalds of old in Scandinavia, went from palace to hut made eagerly welcome by the beauty of their balladry. From ancient Greece itself the *guslar* may have sprung, for Serbo-Kroatia and the south-lying districts have really for all time seen the figure of the blind old man who, like the Scotch bard and the Greek rhapsodists, was the nourisher of a people's patriotism. In the music that the blind old man made are to be detected figments of a people's life, the hidden existence which is led by all of us, detached from duties and extraneous pleasures,—intense, solitary and yet dominant, the idyllic life as it may be called. This the *guslar* with his queer, wedge-shaped instrument, sitting perhaps at the foot of a tree, strumming contentedly idyllic measures, or tumultuously heroic measures, or wantonly capricious measures, or longingly sorrowful measures,—all this the poet wayfarer has expressed for the people of Serbo-Kroatia.

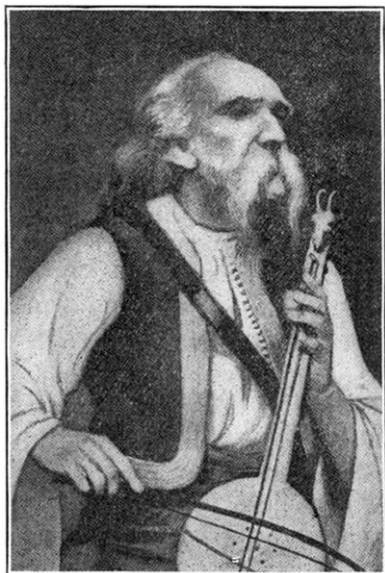
That he is a relic of the past cherished only by a few individuals

who recognize the importance of this messenger of an older time, is regrettable. The many pass on unattentive to the sensitive melody of his compositions, or to the significance which these compositions may bear to the folklorist, the ethnologist, and the musician. For many reasons gusle music is important, for many reasons the songs of the Slavs should not be neglected but preserved and raised to a position of importance among the cultures of the nations. The songs as sung were a people's possession, passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, but unfortunately they were wild flowers in the hands of heedless children, for seldom were they cherished.

Except for the efforts of Vouk Stephanovich-Karajich, who early in the nineteenth century collected and preserved for posterity the ballads of the Servian nation, except for the work of various collectors since then, and of the valuable present-day services of the Matica Hrvatska, a Kroatian literary association in Zagreb (Agram), much of this precious legacy of the Slavic peoples would have been lost. There have been few examples of guslar poets such as Kachich-Mioshich of the eighteenth century, who both sang as well as created and left records of his songs. Unless recorded with music and text as is instanced by the collection made by Francis Xavier Kuhach, the songs are likely to vanish; but collected and standardized, the texts have been translated into other tongues and so have reached the outside world. Thus did Servian verse make its way into the literary output of Goethe, Prosper Mérimée, and Jacob Grimm. Of all the work, however, of this character which is being produced today, there is no contribution more significant to Americans than the "Heroic Ballads of Servia," translated into English verse by Noyes and Bacon. In this recently-published volume the authors have succeeded in giving to the English-speaking world an illuminating insight into the picturesque content of Servian song.

But of more intense interest than the superficial setting of the guslar's jewel is the living content of the jewel itself, that is, the spell of gusle music and the imagery of its verse. Unfortunately the music cannot be conjured up here, but the imagery of the verse is glimpsed again and again in the stories, fanciful pictures of the fire and flash of Ravanitsa's golden walls, the milk-white beauty of veelah

maids, and the sumptuous show of bearskin horse-trappings. Stories of piety, of forcible love-making, or the rescue of loved ones, were woven by the guslar as he sat at the church gates on holy days, or sang to lovers gathered beneath the trees in the long, shadowy twilights. From out of the middle ages perhaps came such a song of God and the angels three sent down from heaven to earth, as sung once on a time by a blind old woman in the streets of Zemun (Semlin). A Fra Angelico setting seems to encompass this story of God who sent his angels, disguised as beggars and bearing gusles of maple wood, to find out how devout his people were. Many a



F:G. 8.—A guslar playing.

pious home was found before the beggars entered the castle of the rich Gavana to be haughtily repulsed by Helena, the proud mistress who offered only a crumpled crust of bread, the like of which was "set of Friday, baked on Saturday, and taken from the oven on Sunday." For such an act God's curse would fall, in secret thought the angels three, till a sudden gift was offered them by Stephan, a lowly servant man, who proffered his pet, a lamb of his heart. A reward for goodness and a reward for evil followed the gift of the lamb, as the old song goes on to say, for God then blessed the servant

man, but the mistress he caused to be dragged down by stones and drowned in the midst of the sea.

To be drowned in the depth of the sea, to be walled alive in the mortar of standing fortresses, to perish in dungeons, or to waste on the battlefield are deaths unsought which have nevertheless overtaken the heroines and heroes of many of these old ballads. In the walls of Scutari lies the record of an unforgotten, half-mythic legend of the girl wife of Goyko, the king who, for the safe building

of the city, sacrificed his young bride to the tower walls. The creeping horror of such castle walls and the damp dinginess of dungeon pits are not passed over when the guslar sings his songs, for a tale is told of Zanko, who for ten long years rotted in prison, till horror entered his soul, as disgust had claimed his body, and he wrote to his beloved, "Wait not for me, but marry another, that I may abandon myself to woe." But the story goes that the beloved, slyly employing deception, rode with her sister-in-law as Turkish viziers, tricked from the sultan the long-suffering prisoner, and carried him to safety once more.

Guile and sinister cunning, always the weapons of the Orient, have been employed again and again in the land that lies as a fringe on the Orient. A drinking song begins this way, as told in Zadar, the white: "I drink neither to you nor to me, but to the hero who would dare to go to Kotor and bring back the beautiful maid Aykuna." To which the doughty Smilyanich Iliya replied by springing upon his waiting mare and dashing off to the Turkish camp disguised as a Turkish vizier, there to deceive the assembled Turks, playing at hurling the deadly *topus* (javelin), by pretended stories of Iliya's weakness and a suggestion of facile conquest. Such genial frankness, fittingly met by the Turks with the courteous offer of coffee and tobacco, apparently persisted when Iliya politely begged instead for a kollo dance with Aykuna, the maid of his heart's secret desire. But a whispered confession between the dancing figures, a sudden covert sneer on the faces of the beholders, and the trickery of guile was discovered. With a leap and a forceful toss, the hero had fastened his conquest to the back of his kneeling mare, and flashed away as a fairy prince, aided by the veelahs, who ever desire to help the daring.

The conception of veelahs, a phantasy of all imaginative people, which is shown alike by children and peoples with a childlike mind, is also found in the poetry of the South Slavs. In the songs, in ballads, heroic legends, and almost in history itself the veelah persists. Like those faint noises which are heard at early evening, which seem as though they are and at the same time are not, so the imaginative Slav nature discerned evanescent traces of supernatural beings, maidens who, beautiful, young, and white-robed,

sympathetically concerned themselves with human affairs. Living in the streams, the high mountains and clouds, veelahs were joyous creatures who would dance at midnight or ride on the morning breeze. Rightly treated they were beneficent, but vexation produced irritation and mistrust, and their interference sometimes played havoc with human happiness, as is strikingly told in the tale of "The Serpent Bridegroom." King Budim, it was said, in complaining because of childlessness, was instructed by veelahs how to supply his lack. The fin of a fish taken in the depth of the Danube would prove the secret cure for his wife. But disaster followed this strange advice, for the son that was born was no human son but merely serpent spawn, and great was the chagrin in that royal house. Still shame could not outlive a parent's love, and, the serpent demanding a human bride, the father must do his bidding. That the veelahs' whim turned at the lovers' embrace proved only eventual ruse and deception, for the discarded skin of the serpent son, that was eagerly burnt by the queen mother, carried the charm of the prince's life, and gave a dead groom to the bride's embrace, as the veelah no doubt could long have foretold.

Likewise a summons to death could be pronounced by veelahs when heroes' lives were waning. So spoke a veelah to Marko Kralyevich on the height of Mount Urvina. A stumbling horse and a veelah's cry told Marko his end was near, for the veelah sang of two fir trees that grew on the top of the mount, where a spring ran bubblingly forth. In the spring was mirrored the day of death and the closing hour of conquering years to the glorious Marko, alone on Mount Urvina. Sometimes a hero's character was portrayed in veelah recitations. The story is told of a conversation between a veelah, an eagle, and this same Marko Kralyevich, whose kindness was remembered by the warrior bird which he succored in the battle of Kosovo. Blood-wet wings and a thirsting beak were carefully tended by Marko, who tenderly lifted the exhausted bird and bore it away to safety.

National figures like Kralyevich are extolled by the tongue of all peoples, and this is no less a characteristic of the South Slavs. Like Kralyevich for the Servians and Kroatians, Mustey Bey has been the particularly accepted figure for the Mohammedan Serbs in

Bosnia. Of these heroes many are the tales that are told and many the wonderful exploits recounted, phenomena which reveal the eternal youth of folklore story. Further, pictures of Tsar Lazar, big, bold, and black-bearded, riding over the hill, and of Turkish hosts, "like the clouds of heaven are their banners over all; and like the snows from heaven their tents upon the plain," are sights which vividly recall the heroes of old Servian war-days. The picturesque mood of those heroic days lies in the creative atmosphere of such phrases as—

"A gray hawk from Jerusalem with a swallow in his beak,  
Flew onward into Servia, Tsar Lazarus to seek."

Conflict, turmoil, attack, and rebuff characterized the life of heroes. That the lives of women were less riotous is to be expected from the almost Oriental seclusion of their habits. Women were not supposed to go to the camp of their lords, as Hassan Aga's wife so bitterly cried out when she was repudiated by her lord for lack of love; women were supposed to stay at home, to tend the white castle and the young ones growing there. In the "Building of Skadar" it is told that even a prince's wife was accustomed to wash and dress her baby, prepare her husband's lunch, and set the house in order. Marko Kralyevich's mother, when she was growing old, addressed her son in terms of sorrow because she could no longer prepare his meals, light the lamp, or pour the yellow wine.

The women's songs give an insight into the lives of the feminine quarter, where the mistress and her household were accustomed to gather and listen to the visiting bard singing gusle songs to the lord and his attendants in an adjoining room. When a troubadour was especially trustworthy he would be permitted to go into the ladies' apartment. In that case he was allowed to sing only women songs, for nought do females care for heroic deeds, thought the master, who was accustomed to adjure his poet to sing of love and hope, of woman's devotion to man and the blessings of a double life.

The subjects of the women's songs cover a wide scope, from the peasant songs of faithful love or dirges for the dead, to the aristocratic handling of themes of honor and of passion. "The grievous ill of heartache" is most often the theme of feminine discontent. There is a song which recounts how a young wife repining at her

lack of children, wanders in a scented garden singing of her grief. Overheard by the mother-in-law, the idle complaint is repeated to the husband, who in great anger kills his wife only to find he has likewise killed his babe with her. Jealousy between mother and daughter-in-law or between sisters-in-law is frequently reprimanded by the moralist in song. Other songs show snatches of passion Oriental in splendor, as when kings promise their worldly all to obtain, as a beloved, the wife of another. "Castles in which no one has entered, horses which no one has ridden, sabres which no one has carried, all these will I give you," says a royal suitor to a reluctant innamorata, gowned with the splendor of the sun, moon-beam girdled, and jeweled with crowns and finger-rings. Vanity, thoughts of self, and adoration bounded a pretty woman's horizon. There is a story of Ali Aga's beloved who, though more beautiful than all other maids in Bosnia, and even Herzegovina, nevertheless was beautiful in vain because the love of her *banus* was turned instead to Omar's golden child, who lived like a bird in a cage knowing none of the lure of sunshine, nor the attraction of the white wheat springing on the hill. Peacock feathers in the hair and bright eyes that looked upon streets, where the merchants and the Turks would pass, are images that conjure up the Orient, as does also the motif of the Turkish fez in a little ballad, which sets a query thus: "To whom belongs the maiden who rides on the open sea, and winds her far-streaming hair under her Turkish fez?" The Byzantine influence marks certain ballads predominantly, as for instance, "The Maiden Margit and Rayko the Voyoda" and "The Marriage of Stoyan Yankovich," which originated in Servia while that country was under eastern rule.

Showing the influence of Constantinople and the East, reminiscent, furthermore, of old Greece and of the still earlier migrations of the Asiatic tribes, the Balkan songs, nevertheless, most strikingly revive a sense of the middle ages, for the art of the bard is distinctly feudal in nature. Very different from the life of the *guslar* today, was his existence in the days of knighthood. Employed by special Beggars, the singers a century or more ago were accustomed to luxury and refinement; they rode about on the masters' horses, ate plentifully at a rich and sumptuous table, and lived withal a life of ease.



The employment sometimes lasted for life, in other instances, for a season; but in either case the singers were in the habit of changing their repertoires and inventing new variations to old songs. Even today this is done to a great extent, and it is on long winter evenings or during the days of fasting that the singer finds the best opportunity for such composition. Gathered in the coffee houses, in the *čaršija* or open market places, in the barracks or, during the summertime, in the out-of-door gardens, the poet singer finds his audience ready to listen and to reward him by rich presents of weapons, horses, cows, and heavy purses, or by flowers, fresh vegetables, and little coins, according to the affluence or niggardliness of his hearers. An audience may be made up of rich peasants, manual laborers, merchants, Christians, Begs, teachers, priests, or officials. Generally among the bystanders is a young boy who is learning to become a gusle singer. By word of mouth almost all songs are learned, and a lad generally begins at about his tenth or fifteenth year. Only one hearing is sometimes necessary to acquire a song, and a boy may often be taught at home, for the talent can descend from great-grandfather to grandfather, father to son. Up to the thirtieth year the singer readily picks up new songs, but after that he learns few. Most of the singers to be seen about the country are forty to fifty years of age; some give up singing when the cares of life overtake them, others are unable to sing after the occurrence of sorrow, as the death of a loved one.

The gusle instrument itself is like a little violin with one string. Sometimes two-sided gusles are seen, but both kinds are unfortunately being rather rapidly supplanted by the violin, and most recently by the accordion. Especially among the Hungarian gypsy players one hears the violin or the flute accompanying the chardash, the dance which, among the Hungarians, takes the place of the kollo of the South Slavs. The origin of these dances, of the gusle instrument and its music, is more a matter of conjecture than of knowledge. Historic traces sometimes lead to China and India, and the influence of Sanskrit culture may be detected. Deep in the life of the race runs the vein of gusle-music, which for the most part is simple and spontaneous, except where marked by the erotic features of outside factors. The time of kollo-dance music is  $\frac{2}{4}$  as a rule, and  $\frac{3}{8}$  or  $\frac{3}{4}$

time generally signifies Tyrolese or Germanic influence. The accompaniment to the melody is generally very simple, composed of the tonic and the dominant. That the ballad or dance music is, in a cultural sense, merely fragmentary, awaiting formulative treat-

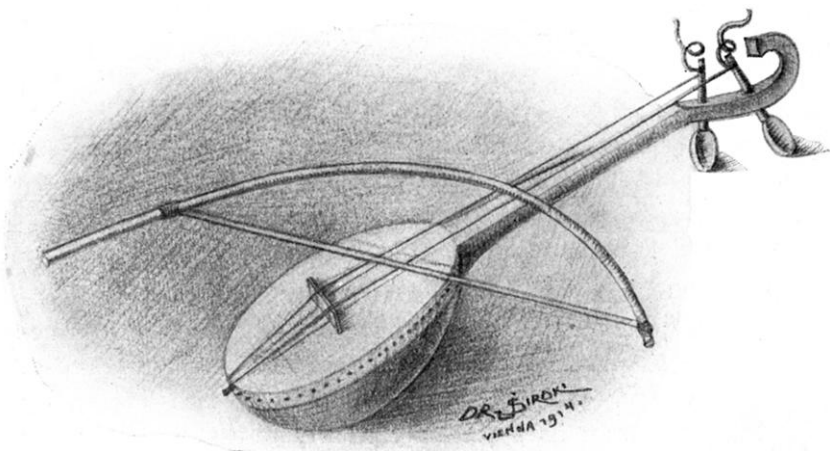


FIG. 9.—Gusle with two strings.

ment as rhapsodies, etc., by a master's hand is illuminatingly suggested by the discovery of Slavic themes in the music of Haydn and Beethoven.

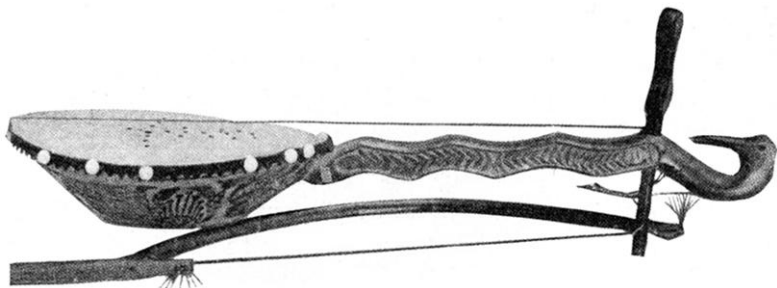


FIG. 10.—Gusle with one string. (The bridge is missing.)

Further, because of their nearness to the life of the people, these kollo dances are instrumental in showing the kinship of all peoples which is manifested in their plays. The "Pillow Kollo," a dance with words and actions, is no other than the "Pillow and Keys"

game played by American children, while the song of the peacock is reproduced the world over by children who sing of the imaginary woes of a pig, a dog, or a wolf. The good-luck tidings expressed in the phrase "When my ships come in" is retold in the kollo song of the veelah who was robbed of her bracelet by a prince. "One ship shall bring powder, another the guns, and a third the warriors to revenge my loss," the angry veelah is said to have cried.

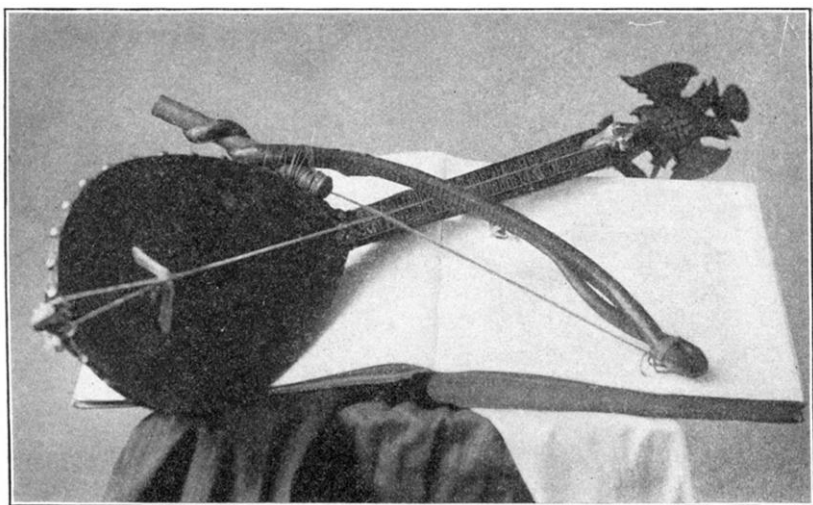


FIG. II.—Gusle with one string.

But that the kollo was usually danced without words demands that to enjoy the dance to the fullest, one must hear the music and see the dancers themselves. The sight of embroidered jackets, blue stockings, and the flashing glint of ducats under a Turkish fez argues for enjoyment, for abandonment and joyous animation. White scarfs wave and dark eyes play to the answering sparkle in swains' eyes as maids and youths dance under the open sky. The scent of wine on the cooling air, the call of nature in the summer breeze, and the sight perhaps of ruined walls dark against the twilight sky, weave gusle music into heart music, and the spirit of long-ago creeps out to envelop the dancing forms. We see again in the light of the past the scarlet trains, the golden spears, and the bright,

white tents of sultan hosts. We lay up memories of jeweled women, nine pendants hanging from resplendent breasts, as relics of bygone days, when sultans saluted their slaves with surreptitious kisses in the shadow of tents, and heroes rode fearlessly, carelessly forth on steeds that were silk-saddled and black with the pelt of the bear. We ask ourselves as we peer in the past, Do we yet today in our dreams of self, so ride and kiss and laugh in tents composed of the stuff of our moods?

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